

VZCZCXRO6159
OO RUEHROV
DE RUEHTV #2906/01 3641641
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
O 291641Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9797
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 002906

NOFORN
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/28/2018
TAGS: [KWBG](#) [MOPS](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [EAID](#) [EFIN](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: GAZA SITUATION REPORT, DECEMBER 29, 18:00

REF: JERUSALEM 2295

Classified By: A/DCM Marc Sievers for reasons 1.4 (B/D).

¶1. (C) Summary: The IDF continued its deployment of ground forces around the Gaza periphery on December 29, with elements of at least three armored and two infantry brigades taking up positions opposite Gaza City and Beit Hanoun. Air strikes against strategic and tactical targets continued throughout the day, as did rocket and mortar fire from the Gaza Strip. One Israeli civilian was killed when a rocket landed in Ashkelon on the morning of December 29. According to IDF contacts, 63 truckloads of humanitarian supplies entered Gaza via Kerem Shalom during the day on December 29, with further deliveries scheduled for December 30. Israeli political leaders, including FM Livni and MoD Barak, caution that military operations could continue for weeks, and that the goal is to change the strategic environment and destroy Hamas' offensive rocket capabilities. Separately, Bank Hapoalim and Bank Discount announced that they will cease providing correspondent banking services to Gaza at midnight on December 31. End summary.

Military Operations

¶2. (SBU) The Israeli Air Force (IAF) is continuing its strategic campaign against Hamas leadership, personnel and infrastructure throughout Gaza. In addition to targets associated with the manufacture, storage and deployment of Kassam rockets, the IAF has also attacked the Hamas Interior Ministry, Islamic University (which contains labs that the GOI says are active in weapons and explosives research for Hamas), and a Hamas guest house used for official visitors. The IDF Spokesperson announced that the office of Hamas PM Ismail Haniyeh was attacked overnight (note: speaking on Israeli radio December 29, Deputy Defense Minister Vilnai denied that Haniyeh was personally targeted in the airstrike), as were "dozens of other Hamas-related targets." Israeli Naval forces also attacked Hamas vessels and coastal structures overnight, according to the Spokesperson's office. In his radio interview, Deputy Defense Minister Vilnai also said the IDF has high morale, and in contrast to the Second Lebanon War, all levels of the military know their task and what is expected of them. Vilnai said the operations will last a long time, "perhaps much longer than people expect." Asked to comment on a possible ground campaign, he declined to answer, saying he did not intend to broadcast to Hamas Israel's military intentions.

¶3. (S/NF) At 16:00 on December 28, the IDF bombed the Philadelphia corridor along the Gaza-Egypt border, destroying 39-40 smuggling tunnels. No Egyptian border guards were harmed. IDF contacts have repeatedly told DATT that the targeting of the tunnels was coordinated with Egypt, and that they had passed the coordinates of the attack points to the Egyptians to enable them to ensure the safety of their border forces.

14. (SBU) As of 15:00 local December 29, 50 rockets have been fired into Israel today from Gaza, according to press reports. One Israeli was killed and 14-16 wounded when a Grad-type rocket struck a construction site in Ashkelon during the morning. Two Israelis have been killed since the start of operation "Cast Lead" on December 27. On December 28, two 122 mm Katyusha rockets struck areas in or near the city of Ashdod, in what appears to be the first attack by rockets with a range in excess of 30 km.

15. (S/NF) The IDF is continuing its deployment of ground forces around the Gaza periphery, although no ground operations had been initiated as of 18:00. This morning the IDF closed most areas bordering the Gaza Strip to allow for the positioning of armor and infantry units. On December 28, DAO officers observed the movement of M-109 artillery and support/ammunition vehicles into the vicinity of Gaza. Heavy trucks laden with concrete shelters, water storage tanks and other logistical equipment intended to support ground operations were also observed deploying around the Gaza border. DAO also observed the movement of Merkava 3 tanks from the 188 Armor Brigade, which is normally deployed on the Lebanese border, into the vicinity of Gaza.

16. (S/NF) During a subsequent observation mission this morning, DAO officers observed a further significant increase in the IDF ground forces presence around Gaza. Elements of three armor brigades, including artillery batteries and Merkava 3 and 4 tanks, and two infantry brigades were deployed opposite Gaza City and Beit Hanoun.

TEL AVIV 00002906 002 OF 003

Political Developments

17. (U) During a special Knesset session to discuss the military operations this morning, DefMin Barak called the operation an "all-out war against Hamas" and said it would be "widened and deepened as is necessary." He said the security services had spent "months" preparing for the operation, and would carry it out until Hamas is not longer capable of launching rockets at Israeli towns. While somewhat less hawkish, FM Livni's remarks to the Knesset made clear that Israel expects the international community to blame Hamas, not Israel, for the current hostilities and the plight of Palestinian civilians in Gaza.

18. (C) During a briefing in Sderot for the diplomatic corps on December 28, Livni and MoD Pol-Mil Director Amos Gilad stressed that Israel needs the support of the international community for an extended military operation designed not to overthrow the Hamas regime in Gaza, but to change the strategic environment by force. Israel will not tolerate continued rocket attacks on its citizens and the operation will continue for weeks. Livni said if the international community forces Israel to stop too soon, Israel will have to do it all over in the near future. She expressed understanding of President Abbas, dilemma and pressure on him to condemn Israeli actions, but she noted that even he had blamed Hamas while in Cairo, and she asked why the rest of the international community was finding it hard to do the same. "This is the minimum we expect of you," she told the assembled diplomats. Livni also said the Gaza operation was in the longer run interests of peace with the Palestinians since Israel could not sign a peace agreement with a Palestinian Authority that did not have control over Gaza.

19. (C) Gilad said he attached high priority to cooperating with UNRWA, WFP, and Arab and Muslim states to ensure a steady flow of humanitarian relief. He said the objective is to force an end to the rocket fire and Israel will continue until that goal is reached. He reiterated comments by other political leaders that ground operations are an option to be used if necessary. Gilad emphasized that the targets have

been only Hamas offices, military installations and rocket workshops and stockpiles. He said Israel is using sophisticated means to avoid civilian casualties but some are unavoidable. Asked if Israel was concerned about Hizballah opening a second front from the north, Gilad said the IDF is on high alert in the north and is "ready for all eventualities." Gilad dismissed the possibility that the fighting in Gaza could touch off a third Intifada in the West Bank, saying that "all of our intelligence assessments are that the PA is in full control in the West Bank and has no interest in allowing a third Intifada."

Humanitarian Assistance

¶10. (SBU) The MFA and the IDF's Coordinator for Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) say they are prepared, to the extent possible given ongoing military operations, to facilitate the passage of all international humanitarian assistance destined for Gaza. According to COGAT, 23 trucks crossed into Gaza via the Kerem Shalom crossing on December 28, with 50 trucks scheduled for delivery December 29. As of 17:00 on December 29, 63 trucks had crossed into Gaza, according to an IDF contact at Kerem Shalom. The crossing was scheduled to remain open until 16:30 but closed late in order to get through an urgently needed donation of 600-1000 units of blood from Jordan. The IDF contact confirmed delivery of five ambulances from the PA, but said the Turkish ambulances, which were supposedly off-loaded in Ashdod, had not been found as of closing time.

¶11. (SBU) According to the IDF source, the 63 trucks included:

- World Food Program: 15 trucks (450 metric tons, including 20 metric tons funded by USAID) of wheat flour;
- UNWRA: 4 trucks of medical supplies and 10 trucks of food (rice, milk powder, sugar);
- ICRC: 3 trucks of medical supplies and 5 ambulances transferred from the West Bank;
- Jordan: 1 truck of 1000 liters blood products, 12 truck of food and medical supplies;
- Egypt: 4 trucks of food;
- Doctors Without Borders: 1 truck of medical supplies;
- CARE: 1 truck of medical supplies;

¶12. (SBU) The IDF expects 50-60 trucks at Kerem Shalom again tomorrow, including five trucks of medical supplies for the ICRC.

TEL AVIV 00002906 003 OF 003

¶13. (SBU) Nahal Oz and Karni: As of 11:00, the MFA reported that plans to open the Nahal Oz terminal for cooking gas transfer was cancelled due to the ongoing military operations near the terminal. COGAT is planning to try again December 30. Plans to transfer 40 trucks of grain through the Karni conveyor terminal were also cancelled, with COGAT examining the possibility of rerouting the grain to Kerem Shalom.

¶14. (SBU) Erez: COGAT source confirmed several emergency crossings at Erez, including a number of UN staff entering Gaza and urgent medical cases exiting Gaza. As of 17:00, Erez was being held open waiting for the arrival of an ambulance to transport an injured individual to the West Bank for medical treatment. The Consular Section is coordinating with COGAT and Consulate General Jerusalem on any potential evacuations of Amcits through Erez, but COGAT knew of none seeking exit on December 29.

¶15. (SBU) Medical Supplies: The MFA argued today that inefficiencies on the part of the Palestinian Authority's (PA) Ministry of Health (MOH), not the GOI, are responsible for the delay of medical supplies into Gaza. According to the MFA, the PA took responsibility for the provision of healthcare products to Gaza as of August. Since that time, it has become the responsibility of the PA MOH to gather,

package, and transfer medical supplies to UNRWA for delivery to recipients in Gaza. Due to delays in preparing supplies, the PA MOH has not been able to deliver enough goods to UNRWA to keep pace with demand, the MFA said. The MFA emphasized that the GOI stood ready to approve for entrance any medical supplies that donors or the PA were prepared to send to Gaza.

COGAT confirmed that the PA had advised of 30 truckloads of medical supplies slated to arrive at Kerem Shalom on December 129. However, only five had arrived before the crossing closed, and COGAT was told by PA officials that no more would be coming.

116. (SBU) MFA contacts said they were now working with the World Health Organization (WHO) to improve the supply of medical goods destined for Gaza. The MFA understands that the WHO has requested additional donations of supplies from its members and continues to coordinate its actions with the PA MOH. The MFA believes the WHO had underestimated the number of injured that would result from the current action and is now ramping up operations to meet demand as quickly as possible. The Israeli Ministry of Health has offered to send emergency medical supplies as well, and is coordinating with the MFA and COGAT to determine whether its assistance is required.

Other

117. (C) Gaza Cash: Bank Hapoalim and Bank Discount, the only two Israeli banks that maintain correspondent relationships with Palestinian banks, report that they plan to permanently discontinue provision of services to Gaza branches as of midnight on December 31st. Banking contacts have informed emboffs that Stanley Fischer, Governor of the Bank of Israel, has not requested that the banks extend their deadlines as he did in November. Without such a call from Fischer by close-of-business today, emboffs believe that Bank Hapoalim and Bank Discount will likely follow through on their plan as announced. Embassy contacts at the banks and in Fischer,s office have agreed to keep emboffs apprised of any changes.

Visit Embassy Tel Aviv's Classified Website:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/telaviv>

CUNNINGHAM